DEPARTMENT OF
TEACHING AND LEARNING SUPPORT SERVICES
Institute for Teaching and Learning Excellence

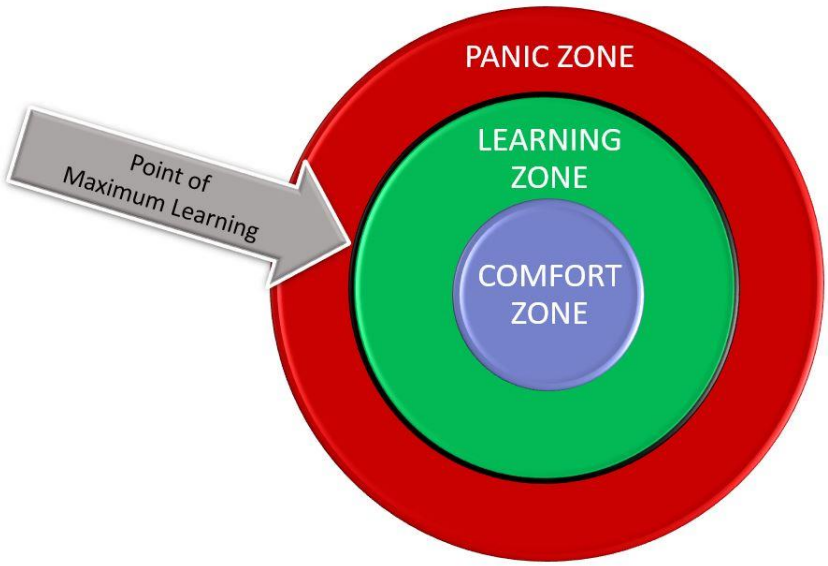
Scaffolding Content for Student Learning

What image comes to your mind when you think of scaffolding?

If you pictured something similar to the temporary structure that you often see next to buildings or construction sites, then you're not alone. Most of us are used to thinking of scaffolding as a support put in place for people who need to reach difficult locations. The scaffolding supports the person as he or she performs a task, and is removed when it's no longer needed. But how does this idea apply to the university classroom?

Scaffolding in education is a similar concept; supports are put in place for students as they work to master content. The best scaffolding provides opportunities for learners to attempt a task with new material, and maybe struggle a bit, then get support and feedback from a person who is more knowledgeable. This is often the instructor, but it can also be a peer during group work. After more opportunities to practice, students then hopefully improve their performance.

Developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky studied what is called the *Zone of Proximal Development*—or *ZPD* as it is commonly named in educational literature. The ZPD is the area between what a learner can do independently and where he or she would struggle without support. The very best learning happens in this zone, somewhere between comfort and panic.



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When instructors practice scaffolding techniques, they often become very skilled at recognizing small nudges to make that can help push each learner to the EDGE, where the learning is optimal. This can be a challenging task for instructors, due to the wide range of learners typically found in a college classroom. We encourage you to consider the following points when implementing scaffolding techniques in your courses:

1. Have clear goals, and know your students' existing levels of knowledge. Assess early and often so that you stay aware of their progress as they work to gain mastery of the content.
2. Consider the sequence of learning experiences, and plan for them to increase in difficulty. Make sure that the teaching of new content is broken down into manageable chunks. Consider the common misconceptions and plan to address them as they occur.
3. Help students make connections to what they already understand related to the new topic. Provide opportunities for students to practice new concepts in class, both independently and with peers. Circulate among the students and talk to them as they are working, and opportunities for instructor scaffolding will naturally occur. Never underestimate the power of a well-placed question to help a student over a difficult spot.
4. Finally, ensure that the practice tasks help prepare students for any upcoming projects or exams. Make sure that feedback is provided in plenty of time for students to apply it to the next task.

The work put into scaffolding instruction will be well worth it—your students will increase both in skills and confidence.